

Some questions for Peter Saul

By Paul Laster



Photograph: Farzad Owrang, courtesy KAWS

A radical American artist who mixes social issues with pop culture to make trippy, psychological paintings, Peter Saul has been identified with Pop Art, Funk Art and The Hairy Who, simply because his first art dealer, Allan Frumkin, was based in Chicago. Receiving a generous stipend from Frumkin for 30 years, Saul painted whatever he wanted, which is why his work is now so widely embraced. Current with his eagerly awaited New Museum

85-year-old artist sat down with TONY to discuss his lucky life and direct, instinctive style for making his highly controversial art.

Why did you become an artist?

I didn't want to work in an office; I knew that by the time I turned 15.

From the late-'50s to the mid-'60s, you lived in Paris and Rome. How did you manage to start a career over there?

I didn't know what to do and no one else knew either. I heard of five or six American artists in Paris, but I didn't actually know their work because I'd skipped art history: My teacher told me that if I *didn't* show up, he'd give me a B. Eventually, I managed to show my drawings to a dealer with galleries in Chicago and New York. He asked me how much I wanted for them. I

said \$15; he said, "I can do \$25."

You were lucky.

I've been lucky all my life, but I hope I'm not going to pay for it with some huge disease, if you know what I mean.

The work you did back then has been described as a precursor to Pop Art. Do you agree?

No. I didn't know about Pop Art and I was pretty upset when I read about it because I thought it was my idea.

How did you come by it, since the action was in New York and you were in Europe?

I never paid any attention to New York, because first of all, I had a fear of flying due to the fact that I just missed getting on a plane that crashed in a mid-air collision. But I wanted to get away from Abstract Expressionism. I got this idea from *Mad* magazine that you could tell a story with pictures, which no one was doing at the time. So I'd sit in a café, smoked Gauloise cigarettes and come up with ideas, most of which were from memory.

Speaking of *Mad*, in the past, you've said that even though you're in your eighties, you paint like a 15 year old.

Well, yeah, I don't want to express maturity in my art.

Is that to keep your work edgy and interesting?

Well being interesting is one of my goals; it's a big one.

Do you see yourself as a rebel?

Hopefully, yes.

With a cause?

Other than my own well-being, no.

"Peter Saul: Crime and Punishment" is on view at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, through May 31